The Princess Bride and the parodic impulse: The seduction of *Cinderella*

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Abstract

This article examines the popular film The Princess Bride *to show how screenwriter William Goldman and director Rob Reiner use parody to simultaneously reject and reaffirm the values of fairy tale True Love. We extend here our model of parodic communication comprised of four intentionally interacting acts: 1) a verbal expression which re-presents some prior action or event; 2) the flaunting of (1); 3) a critical act; and 4) a comic act.* The Princess Bride *offers a particularly overt demonstration of the model: it re-presents earlier depictions of fairy tale True Love, flaunts that re-presentation, holds up True Love for critique, and does so humorously. Whereas parody often leaves its audience with simultaneous messages of critique and humor,* The Princess Bride *pays tribute to the very values it apparently rejects. The tribute to True Love is a function of the interactions among the four parodic acts: the heightening of the comic act coupled with the muting of the critical act weakens the critique; and the heightening of the re-presenting act reaffirms the values under critique. The filmmakers manipulate these interactions to advance two simultaneous messages: "Twue Rove is funny," and "True Love is good."*

Introduction

Parodic communication

In an earlier paper[1] we have argued the communicative function of parody informed by the work of language philosophers and linguists such as Wittgenstein, Ryle, Austin, Searle, Grice, Strawson, and Brown and Levinson. We make several broad claims in that paper, claims that

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bear repeating here. First, we argue that parody is not simply or only a literary genre, but is something that people do, do meaningfully, and, sometimes, do to communicate such meaning. As an act of communication, parody may be further described as a function of four intentional and intentionally interacting acts:

1. a verbal expression which intentionally re-presents some prior action or event
2. the flaunting of (1)
3. a critical act
4. a comic act

The history of Western literature and literary criticism finds neither extraordinary nor new definitions of parody invoking imitation (or re-presentation), flaunting, criticism, and humor. Poets and critics have emphasized one or more of these four features at the expense of the others depending upon their particular theoretical perspectives. Early Greeks recognized that the mimetic, imitative, allusive, or citational aspect was essential to parody. This mimetic, or "re-presentational" function has found its fullest expression in the twentieth century in Mikhail Bakhtin's reduction of all novelistic discourse to parody. Bahktin argues that in novels, ordinary (or direct) language(s) "become the object of representation" that is, they are "presented as images of whole languages, characteristically typical images, highly limited and sometimes almost comical. ... The author participates in the novel (he is omnipresent in it) with *almost no direct language of his own*" (1981: 47; Bakhtin's emphasis). The italicized phrase encapsulates our problem: If a speaker of parody is using almost no direct language of his or her own, how is it possible for him or her to mean something serious by his or her parodic utterances?

Fortunately, as Bahktin and as the early Greeks noticed, mimesis, imitation, or citation, is not sufficient to a definition of parody. What distinguishes parody from mere quotation, citation, or allusion, is that the repetition, or re-presentation is markedly different from its object. Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky emphasizes parody's marked difference from its object with his sense of *ostraniene* (estrangement, or "the process or act that endows an object or image with 'strangeness' by 'removing' it from the network of conventional, formulaic, stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions" (1991: xix)). Shklovsky's "definition" of parody amounts to little more than "laying bare the device," a definition that ignores the function of such devices (bared or otherwise

cloaked), but which reflects his primary interest — in the formal devices available to writers.

Critics have generally accorded two functions to parody. In her survey of pre-Platonic poetry and literary criticism, Rosemary Harriott, for example, identifies humor and criticism as the two major "modes" of parody. She also invokes the acts of re-presentation and flaunting:

> Let us first consider parody as a mode of humour. In parody, especially parody performed on stage, there is an element of mimicry [act of re-presentation]. Children delight in catching the mannerisms of those well known to them and exaggerate [act of flaunting] until what in truth is mildly odd becomes hilariously funny. ...
>
> As a mode of criticism parody achieved much the same results as critical analysis has achieved in recent times and I do not think it extravagant to claim that it was a more subtle and accomplished form of criticism than any other then practiced. (1969: 158–59)

The critical function is not universally accorded parody by either the ancients or the moderns as Margaret Rose (1993) demonstrates in her recent survey of theories of parody. A. S. Martin makes one of the baldest rejections of criticism as necessary or sufficient to a definition of parody: "Parody generally, but by no means invariably, criticizes" (1896: 100). Still, writers and critics from Scaliger to Auden generally assume that parody is critical of its object.

Despite their varied interests, from imitation and stylistic devices to the formalization of genres (whether by convention or by subversion of convention), what binds these critics is their nearly uniform disinterest in the communicative function of parody, indeed with the fact that parody is something that people consciously do.[2]

In developing our model of verbal parody, we examined its communicative status and paid particular attention to those intentions necessary to communication: an informative intention, "to inform the audience of something"; and a communicative intention, "to inform the audience of one's informative intention" (Sperber and Wilson 29). The parodist who wishes to communicate her parodic message will manipulate the four acts (an intentional verbal re-presentation, the flaunting of that re-presentation, the critical act, and the comic act) guided by the two intentions identified by Sperber and Wilson. Of course, not all parody is communicative, but much that is so intended is underdescribed with appeals limited to genre distinctions, stylistic devices, or aesthetic con-

cerns. We find the major benefit of the communicative model is that it brings parody more fully into the world of human interaction.

The four acts are used by the speaker to convey at minimum a parodic message and often a complex of messages about its re-presented object. As numerous theorists have noted, the nature of the parodic message is inherently critical. The necessary presence of humor, however, makes verbal parody considerably more complicated than simple critique.

Contributing to the complicated nature of the parodic message is that the messages conveyed by parody are usually, if not always, done so indirectly. The parodic message, whether it highlights criticism or humor, cannot take an explicit form: we can't say, "It is parodic that the Reagan administration turned ketchup into a vegetable."[3] Our instincts tell us this is wrong; the bald statement in and of itself lacks the humor essential to verbal parody. Even the minimal parodic message must be "worked out" by an audience, with the understanding that the speaker expects her audiences to work it out. In the parlance of speech-act theory, the parodic message is conveyed *indirectly* or, as Paul Grice would say, by "implication." In addition to taking the form of an indirect speech act, the parodic utterance can function to convey additional, nonparodic messages.

As we tested our model against the messages people convey by their parodies we noted a curious anomaly. Although the parodic message is inherently critical of its object, people sometimes use parody to pay tribute to the very objects that they appear to be criticizing. We suggest that the apparent contradiction between the simultaneous laudatory and critical messages might be reconciled by appealing to politeness theory.

Like any speech act, the parodic speech act is chosen for its appropriateness to the context, which includes the social situation motivating and surrounding the speech act. According to Brown and Levinson (1988), "If S [speaker] is *too* polite ... he may insult [H] (or simply wound his feelings) by implying that D [the social distance between S and H] or P(H) [the power of the hearer] is greater than it is" (p. 230). "Too polite" here means that the speaker has "overestimat[ed]" the threat of his intended message, and as a result, communicates his message in an inappropriately polite manner. Returning to verbal parody, we believe that it is used to pay tribute to its object precisely when a direct expression of tribute or affection would prove too threatening to the speaker or hearer. The greater the compliment, the more likely it would be to pose a threat to the social status of one or more of the participants,

and the more likely the speaker would be to employ some disavowable means of flattery. The problem intensifies with the social or personal importance accorded the object of tribute.

Our concern was to develop a model of verbal parody limited to a single situated speech act. Our hope was that once we had done so, we could turn our attention to longer stretches of discourse and, indeed, to all communicative behaviors, to consider how re-presenting discourse can be used to critique and subsequently reaffirm social values while it entertains us.

Here we examine the film *The Princess Bride* and show how it uses parody to simultaneously reject the values of fairy tale True Love and to reaffirm those same values. The film offers a particularly overt demonstration of the four acts of our model of verbal parody: it highlights re-presentation, flaunts that re-presentation, holds up its objects for critique, and does so humorously. Oftentimes, a parody will stop here — leaving its audience with simultaneous messages of critique and humor (x is bad, or ugly, or immoral, and x is funny). The model, however, shows us how *The Princess Bride* is able to go beyond these messages to pay tribute to the very values it apparently rejects. The tribute "panegyric parody" pays is typically disavowable and is a function of the interplay of the four acts comprising verbal parody.

The tribute *The Princess Bride* pays is to True Love — the happily-ever-after union of Ideal Man and Ideal Woman, but it does so indirectly through parody, through "Twue Rove" — the sly and subtle critique of True Love wrapped in a mantle of deferrals, indirections, and humor. In spite of (and because of) the parody, we know that *The Princess Bride* professes True Love: we feel it at the end of the tale when Buttercup and Westley ride into the night, forever reunited. We are left with a riddle: the filmmakers disavow True Love, they parody True Love, and yet, they pay tribute to True Love. How is this tribute communicated to us?

Disavowal: The Princess Bride *is not a story of True Love*

Critics have not been very kind to *The Princess Bride*, in part because they've found the convention of the framing device, a grandfather reading the story to his grandson, to be tired and tiresome, and in part because the humor distracts from what is perceived as the film's primary motivation — "celebrating True Love." How is it that we know, with *Variety*'s J. Greenberg (1987–1988), that "[a]t heart, 'Princess Bride' celebrates

the power of true love to triumph over adversity" when, as the grandfather announces at the outset, the story engages a host of topics: fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love, and miracles? Moreover, if parody communicates by indirection, how do we know we are looking in the right direction?

The filmmakers go out of their way to distance themselves from every explicit avowal of True Love found in the film. They do so in two ways. First, they highlight the frames in which such avowals occur. In so doing, they remind the viewers that these avowals are embedded: it is the characters, or the grandfather and grandson, who are commenting upon True Love. If this was not enough to distance themselves from True Love, they engage in a bit of verbal play carefully calculated to allow them to say that they were not speaking of True Love at all, but of something else altogether. Neither dodge is used parodically. Instead, the filmmakers use them to insure that we, as viewers, understand that the film is about True Love. Before turning to the difficult question "How do the filmmakers recoup and avow True Love through their parody?" we should briefly examine these disavowals.

Viewers will recall the basic framing device employed by the filmmakers: A grandfather (Peter Falk) visits his sick grandson (Fred Savage) to read him a story. The grandson has his doubts about his grandfather and asks his mother to get rid of him. The grandfather is inescapable, however, and the grandson must suffer the reading of a story. The grandson rejects the story (and his grandfather) along the way. The story itself concerns Westley and Buttercup (Cary Elwes and Robin Wright), a young rural couple who have fallen in love. The economics are such that Westley leaves to seek his fortune with the promise that he will return. Reports have it that he is killed by pirates. Buttercup is eventually chosen by the evil Prince (Chris Sarandon) as his bride. She is kidnapped by Inigo, Fezzik, and Vizinni (Mandy Patinkin, Andre the Giant, and Wallace Shawn), three venturers who have been hired by the Prince to start a war with a neighboring land, but she is rescued by the dread Pirate Roberts, who, it turns out, is none other than Westley in disguise. Westley and Buttercup brave the dangers of the Fire Swamp, only to be captured by the Prince as they emerge. Westley is to be tortured and killed. Buttercup is to be married to the Prince and killed (as part of the revised plot to initiate a war). The torture leaves Westley dead, or mostly dead. He is rescued by Inigo and Fezzik and a visit to the local miracle man partially resuscitates him. The three then storm the castle to rescue

the Princess. After madly dashing about the castle with swords and verbal abuse, the trio rescues Buttercup and the four of them ride into the night. With the reunion of Buttercup and Westley in True Love comes a reaffirmation of the grandfather/grandson relationship.

True Love is announced at the outset. We hear the grandfather's narration as we see Westley and Buttercup on the farm, her whimsical demands and his stock reply — "As you wish." At last Buttercup realizes that "As you wish" means "I love you." They kiss. Greenberg identifies what follows as a "story device" that "weaken[s] the impact" of the celebration of true love: the Grandson interrupts the telling of the story to reject the kiss and the love it represents: "Are you trying to trick me? Where's the sports? Is this a kissing book?" Richard Strelitz (1988) offers a kinder analysis of the framing device: "The boy provides a running commentary on the film in progress and thus allows [Director Rob] Reiner to have both a child's perspective and that of a cynic" (p. 286). Strelitz astutely acknowledges the multiple perspectives such a device affords, perspectives which may result in multiple and at times contradictory messages. Are the messages Reiner's? The scene builds to its conclusion — the departing Westley promises to return, the doubting Buttercup seeks assurances, and Westley's reply (spoken by Westley, not narrated by the grandfather) "This is True Love" (which may be the baldest avowal of true love in the film) are set in high contrast with the grandson's repeated interruptions ("I don't believe this"; "Are you trying to trick me? Is this a kissing book?"). Westley, the character, avows true love; the grandson, the narratee, rejects true love. The contrast highlights the object, but leaves the filmmakers safely out of having to commit themselves one way or the other.

This embedding of the avowal within a story which can be commented upon (and thereby disavowed) by the tellers is reprised soon after Westley, disguised as the dread Pirate Roberts, rescues Buttercup from Inigo, Fezzik, and Vizinni. Buttercup tells the pirate of her love, a love that is safely removed from the immediate narrative context by virtue of being both in the past and dead. "I have loved more deeply than a killer like yourself could ever dream," says Buttercup. This time, it is the pirate who interrupts the telling to comment on the tale. He raises his hand to strike her and stops. "That was a warning Highness. The next time my hand flies on its own, for where I come from there are penalties when a woman lies." Not only is the love avowed by Buttercup both past and dead, the pirate comments upon her avowal and concludes it is false.

The pirate then tells a story of his own — of a youth named Westley who asked to live for True Love. Unbeknownst to Buttercup, the pirate is Westley in disguise. So the avowal is displaced, from the pirate (Westley as narrator) to the young boy (Westley as character). Eventually Westley is revealed through Buttercup's comment on the pirate and his story. She pushes the teller down a hill. The scene builds to its conclusion with Westley's "As you wish" and True Love is reunited. As these frames are removed — the past becomes present, the pirate becomes Westley, the tellers of the stories (Princess Buttercup and the dread Pirate Roberts) and the characters therein (farm girl Buttercup and farm boy Westley) merge — the Grandson interrupts to remind us that other frames are still in play: Westley, Buttercup, and True Love are at least two frames removed from the filmmaker/viewer context.

Grandson. Oh no, no, please.
Grandfather. What is it?
Grandson. They're kissing again. Do we *have* to hear the kissing part?
Grandfather. Someday you may not mind so much.
Grandson. Skip on to the Fire Swamp, that sounded good.
Grandfather. You're sick, I'll humor you.

Soon after Westley and Buttercup survive the Fire Swamp and are recaptured by the Prince, we hear the grandfather begin to narrate the marriage of Buttercup and the evil Prince. The sound of his voice by now serves to call attention to the distinction between the telling and the told. As the wedding proceeds, an old crone interrupts to curse the Princess for throwing away True Love for a kingdom. We quickly discover that this is a dream dreamt by Buttercup. The Grandson's interruption and assertion that Buttercup and the evil Prince couldn't get married secures the multiple frames. The reason advanced by the grandson for not believing in the marriage points to two other incidents where True Love is advanced but in such a way as to be disavowable: the grandson resituates True Love as subordinate to a sense of justice: "Hold it hold it. Grandpa you read that wrong. She doesn't marry Humperdinck, she marries Westley. I'm just sure of it. After all that Westley did for her if she didn't marry him, it wouldn't be fair." The grandson does not make his appeal to True Love, but to a sense of justice and obligation — Westley has done too much for Buttercup for it to be "fair" that the Prince should marry her. Later, when the Prince invokes True Love, he does so in the service of Ultimate Suffering. Finally, as the Prince and

Buttercup are to wed, True Love (or, as the high priest intones "Twue Rove") is subordinated to Marriage as an institution sanctioned by the church. These recontextualizations are eventually undermined (the wedding is found to be infelicitous — Buttercup didn't say "I do" and Inigo hears the screams of Ultimate Suffering — these screams indicate True Love as well as being the means by which Inigo secures Westley's rescue and hence, the happily-ever-after ending). As the recontextualizations are undermined, so are the grounds for disavowing True Love.

Another means of deferring True Love is through verbal play. As we have already seen, Westley employs this device at the opening of the film with his repetitious "As you wish" which stands for "I love you." The two are eventually held synonymous, until the end of the film when the grandfather replies to his grandson's request that he return the next day to reread the story. The grandfather's "as you wish" is supposed to and does invoke "I love you," but the love is hardly the True Love of Westley and Buttercup. It is more akin to the love Inigo has for his father, a familial love that drives Inigo in his quest for revenge. The synonym for True Love advanced in the opening is misplayed at end. The misplay is subtle, but renders suspect the certain equivalency of "As you wish" and "I (true) love you." The filmmakers might, if pressed, say that they weren't talking about True Love at all, but about familial love.

Two other bits of verbal play also highlight the nature of True Love and ask us to decide whether the filmmakers are advancing True Love, or something like, but not quite, True Love. The mostly dead Westley is taken to Miracle Max for revival. Max fills Westley's lungs with air and asks what he has to live for (a question, it will be recalled, asked by the dread Pirate Roberts of the young farm boy Westley). Max twists "True Love" into " 'To Blave.' And as we all know, 'to blave' means 'to bluff.' " This bit of phonetic and semantic nonsense is rejected by Valerie, Max's wife, but serves the purpose here — if not to reject, at least to tangle True Love in a host of other issues that the filmmakers might disavow. If we haven't figured this out, Max makes the tangle explicit — True Love means To Bluff.

The phonetic nonsense presented in the wedding invokes not semantics, but pragmatics, and the procedural nature of meaning and avowing as we have just mentioned. The high priest conducts the service — with a speech impediment — mispronouncing "True Love" with the "Twue Rove." This bit of mockery of the phonetic procedure is echoed in the mangling of the pragmatic procedure guiding felicitous weddings: the

procedure is incorrectly and incompletely enacted — the priest says "Man and Wife" at the end, but Buttercup has not said "I do." The King himself thinks the wedding "strange," a fact brought home by Westley when he notes that if one does not say it, it isn't so. This is a double edged argument — Buttercup has not avowed "Twue Rove" much less "True Love" with her absent "I do."

Such are the numerous advancements of True Love in the film, most, if not all of which the filmmakers' are able to disavow. With the possible exceptions of the linguistic play of Miracle Max and the High Priest, there is little parody in these explicit presentations. True Love is advanced by the characters, or by the grandfather in his reading, but it is hardly re-presented. A re-presentation demands that the original presentation be recalled. It is difficult in these instances to identify what such originals might be. In short, it is one thing to talk about True Love; it is another thing altogether to re-present it. What is flaunted in these scenes, therefore, is not the difference between some original presentation of True Love and its parodic counterpart. What is flaunted is the *pragmatic context* either by calling attention to the framing devices, or to language itself. Nearly always some critical commentary is offered upon the nature and value of True Love. What humor there is in these scenes points in other directions. Miracle Max's avowal of True Love as the greatest thing in the world is immediately qualified. Better even than True Love is an MLT (mutton, lettuce and tomato sandwich). The humor is not directed toward True Love, but away from it.

Where is the parody of True Love? Buttercup's flinging herself down the hillside upon discovering that the tumbling Man in Black is her dearest Westley offers a clue. True Love, as an abstract, is difficult to parody: how can one re-present something that is present only as an abstract? We must flesh it out, so to speak, give it body, give it an original presentation. We suggested that True Love is the happily-ever-after union of Ideal Man and Ideal Woman — that is, True Love is a state of being, it needs to be instantiated, to be found in the particulars, not in the abstract. We might, then, look to the state of being — in particular at what is presented to us as Ideal Man and Ideal Woman.

Parody: The Princess Bride *is a story of Twue Rove*

In the previous section we have seen that the filmmakers have made sure that we recognize the central topic of the film: True Love, especially as

we find it in the paradigmatic fairy tale/adventure story. The filmmakers manipulate the four essential acts of parody (the intentional re-presentation of the object of parody, the flaunting of the re-presentation, a critical act, and a comic act) to parody Buttercup as the Ideal Woman — the beautiful, submissive, in-need-of-protection, and loyal heroine. They parody Westley as the Ideal Man — the strong, intelligent, and artful protector of the Ideal Woman. By doing so, they parody the happily-ever-after union of the Ideal Woman and the Ideal Man.

We have seen that the frequent interruptions of the grandfather's telling of the story serve to dissociate the filmmakers from the serious avowals of True Love. In addition, they reveal that the filmmakers are giving us more than, and/or other than, the paradigmatic fairy tale alone. These interruptions display the relationship between grandfather and grandson, and what is more important help flaunt the re-presentational nature of the story and ultimately its object — True Love.

We have other, equally obvious clues that all is not the way we expect fairy tales to be. There is the incessant doubling and tripling of events that constantly remind us that we have seen something distinctly like, though not quite like, this fairy tale before: Westley's art, strength and intelligence aren't tested once, but three times; Westley doesn't have one masked identity, but two — the Man-in-Black who disguises Westley as the Ideal Man, and the Man-in-Black who disguises Westley as the dread Pirate Roberts. Westley dies twice — once a reported death at the hands of the dreaded pirate, and a second time at the hands of the Prince in the Pit of Despair. Buttercup's loyalty isn't tested once, but twice. Westley doesn't have to rescue Buttercup once, but twice, and there isn't one infelicitous wedding, but two — one at the Prince's, and one in Buttercup's dream. These iterations of re-presented fairy-tale events further flaunt these re-presented events to call attention to what is a central feature of the film as a parody of True Love: it thrives on what is not; it announces that it is intentionally like, but not quite, the real thing. Once we've understood that we are about to be told a story of "Twue Rove," we can look more closely at story events to see how the values of True Love are parodied.

To begin our tale of Twue Rove, let's return to that moment when Buttercup, discovering that the Man-in-Black is her True Love, throws herself into her bone-crushing tumble down the mountainside. It is a "noble act" which re-presents for us her loyalty to her True Love. The

Ideal Woman will follow her Ideal Man anywhere. Buttercup as a picture of loyalty, however, is far from the image of a forlorn Juliet who dies for her Romeo. We know that we are to read this act as something more than a mere (or merely serious) act of loyalty by the way it's flaunted. Buttercup half-trips and half-throws herself down the mountain and tumbles with all the grace of a rag doll; her legs, arms, and hair flail about, and her body bounds and bounces unceremoniously to the valley floor. The incongruity between the loyal Juliet who gracefully goes to her death for her Romeo, and the graceless Buttercup who tumbles down a mountain only to stand up unscathed serves to belittle the value of loyalty. As we laugh at Buttercup's comic display, we also laugh, quite inadvertently, at Juliet's loyalty unto death, indeed at loyalty in general.

Another of the Ideal Woman's roles is her need to be protected.[4] The filmmakers seem to take particular delight in parodying this characteristic as Westley and Buttercup make their hazardous passage through the infamous Fire Swamp which re-presents the Dark Wood of folklore and fairy tale. The dangers re-presented to us are distinctly like those of the Dark Wood in that they are "deadly threats" to Buttercup: her dress does catch fire, and she does plunge into a pit of lightning (quick) sand. The filmmakers make it quite clear, however, that these "deadly threats" are not so deadly after all — especially when contrasted with the more serious threat the screaming eels posed to Buttercup's life earlier in the film: they flaunt the re-presentation of the forest's dangers by offering us an absurd counterpart, and so make it clear to us that their purpose is not to portray danger, but to belittle it and our lady's need for protection. Since it is the Ideal Man who is doing the protecting, we find a similar belittlement of him and his art, strength, and intelligence. The fire bursts, the terrible danger after which the swamp is named, are small volcanic eruptions which are heralded by a decidedly pronounced burbling that, once recognized, present no more threat than a stump or fallen log. The choreography serves to flaunt and belittle this danger as well as Buttercup's need to be protected from it: Westley and Buttercup's movement through the swamp recalls two lovers walking hand in hand through a wood. The Fire Swamp percolates; Westley lifts Buttercup from a log, raises her skyward, swirls, and sets her down by his side — all this to avoid the "dangerous" fire bursts. The ease and grace with which the threat of the fire bursts is avoided serve to minimize the dangers rather than aggrandize Westley's prowess as protector of his true love. Then there is the lightning sand which swallows Buttercup and threatens to

suffocate her; whether it is because of Westley's overzealous Tarzan imitation or Buttercup's absurd lung capacity which is displayed by her voluminous intake of breath, this apparent threat comes across (again) as no threat at all. Our "lions and tigers and bears" are "ROUSes" (Rodents of Unusual Size) which waddle after Westley and offer us so many human gestures that we feel sorry for them. In the end, we see the discounting of the Ideal Woman's need to be protected achieved by the extravagant rescues from what are truly no dangers at all. We have in the Fire Swamp some of the movie's funniest moments, as well as some of the more pointed critiques of those values necessary to True Love's Ideal Woman.

The general tenor is of parody as Buttercup's virtues are re-presented and flaunted for comic and critical ends. The parody is muted, however, for the flaunting is not as broad as it might be, and, therefore, more likely to be mistaken as straight presentation. What is re-presented is too much like the real thing, too much like the way values held by and about women are typically expressed to locate the flaunting which would signal the parodic impulse. The possibility of audiences mistaking the straight for the parody is a particular problem for the parodist, but the potential confusion also serves the parodist well: it can be exploited for more subtle critique and commentary.

The parody of the Ideal Man in service of the Ideal Woman in *The Princess Bride* is broader, and consequently less likely to be confused with a straight telling despite the reading given us by the grandson. In the sword fight between Westley and Inigo, for example, the flaunting is achieved through exaggeration. Not only is Westley a master of the sword, he is a master with both his left and right hands. Not only is Westley a master with both hands, Inigo is as well. As they shift from left to right hands, the entire duel becomes more acrobatic. They work their environment in the style of classic Hollywood swashbucklers, but they also take advantage of a tree branch to display further their agility: Inigo uses it to perform a full flip, Westley counters with a double. The sheer excess is comic in and of itself, but it also highlights the absurdity of skill for skill's sake. There is no end to the variations they might develop (and name). Once the filmmakers establish the excess, they reduce the entire institution called "skilled" combat to the simplest of all techniques: hit your opponent over the head with the butt end of your sword.[5] The rest, this scene tells us, is flash. By re-presenting the physical and mental skills of the master swordsman, and by flaunting the

re-presentation through a kind of comic exaggeration, the filmmakers effectively ridicule the "master swordsman," his skill, and by association, the Ideal Man.

By way of contrast, the parody of strength works by understatement. During his hand-to-hand battle with Fezzik, Westley manages a choke hold on the giant from the rear. From there, he simply holds on. We have no Heracles here, no hero strong enough to defeat the Nemean Lion or the Erythmanthian Boar, and certainly no hero strong enough to bear the world on his back. Fezzik feebly flails and backs his opponent against outcrops as he attempts to free himself from the choke hold, but the game is given up too quickly. Westley's great feat of strength has been to hold on for a few moments while the giant slowly passes out.

The filmmakers employ a third means of flaunting in their parody of intellect as it is re-presented in the battle of wits to the death between Westley and Vizinni: displays of intelligence which are both excessive and irrelevant to the situation at hand make the filmmakers' intent to parody quite clear. Vizinni, the character whose acts re-present supreme intelligence, applies the vast quantity of his knowledge to the riddle Westley places before him in offering the choice between two goblets of wine: where is the poison? Vizinni invokes medieval speculation about the attraction of like substances, and appeals to a theory of physics that has everything in Australia upside down and backward. He cites things out of his time (quasi-medieval) and place (quasi-Europe). His prescience is demonstrated by his references to the dangers of land wars in Asia (with its implicit reference to U.S. involvement in Vietnam) and to Australia and its denizens. His bombastic barrage of facts and aphorisms from across the centuries displays his mental capacities. But none of them brings him any closer to identifying the location of the poison: Vizinni chooses a goblet, drinks and dies. The juxtaposition of the bombastic display with its uselessness in aiding Vizinni in answering the riddle cements the parody of the unsituated intellect — all that knowledge for naught. The filmmakers have effectively parodied the pompous intellectual and by association, "intelligence" for intelligence's sake.

Vizinni's loss in the battle of wits is worth further consideration, as it points to the direction we might take in working out how *The Princess Bride*, this film which parodies True Love, seems also to pay tribute to it. Vizinni dies because he has acted according to a too limited view of the communication context. In working out the answer to the riddle, he focuses primarily on the riddle as if he were in the midst of a game. He

has forgotten, or is too confident to consider seriously, that Westley is using the riddle as an instrument of death. Had he taken that into more serious account, he might have considered the possibility that both cups contained poison, and so fared better.

Our riddle also requires a more complete description of the communicative context. But our riddle is also slightly more complicated. Where Westley spikes both cups with poison and asks Vizinni to divine its location, the filmmakers "spike" two stories and ask us to divine the tribute to True Love. At the same time, they are saying "there is no True Love" with duplicitous winks.

Paying tribute: The Princess Bride *is a story of True Love*

At the beginning of the article we suggested *The Princess Bride* presents us with a riddle: Where is the True Love? The end of the last section has complicated the riddle by indicating the filmmakers have said simultaneously "True Love is good" and "There is no True Love, only the sly and subtle critique of True Love wrapped in a mantle of humor." To show how the filmmakers can send us two seemingly antithetical messages we find ourselves like Vizinni, in need of a more complete description of the communicative context(s) that includes the various stories being told, the communicative frames in which they occur, and their attendant messages. We will also need to show how the filmmakers use these interacting messages and frames to accept varying degrees of responsibility for them. Finally, we consider why the filmmakers go to such great lengths to simultaneously reject and affirm True Love. Why don't they simply convey the message that True Love is good by telling a straight fairy tale/high adventure story?

Parody is not unique in its ability to foster multiple and simultaneous messages, to comment on multiple objects, or to pay tribute. For example, the grandfather in film *The Princess Bride* tells two simultaneous stories, one of high adventure and one of True Love. The grandson also suspects his grandfather of using the high adventure story to trick him into accepting the True Love story and its attendant values. The filmmakers themselves use the story for multiple reasons. In offering us a view of the grandfather reading the story *The Princess Bride* to his grandson, the filmmakers tell us a story of familial love, promote the parody of True Love, and reinforce the tribute to True Love.

While parody is not unique in these matters, it does send multiple and simultaneous messages and pays tribute in its own special way: as a function of the interactions among the various acts comprising the more general parodic act (as well as powerful social forces which require its use). Each of these acts carries its own "message" which, when placed against the other parodic acts in a particular context, works variously to pay tribute to or criticize its object, or to send simultaneously two or more (sometimes antithetical) messages. In *The Princess Bride*, the filmmakers also use a number of nonparodic messages and communicative strategies to support the antithetical messages "True Love is good" and "True Love is to be ridiculed." The nonparodic messages and communicative strategies, however, are merely supporting players. The film stars parody. With all the duplicity we have already seen, we should not be surprised to find that parody offers the working out of the antithetical messages in at least two ways.

As we suggest in "The Pragmatics of Verbal Parody" (1997), the heightening of the comic act coupled with the muting of the critical act works particularly well in paying tribute to the object of parody, especially when avowable tribute is seen as inappropriate to the communicative situation. The "tribute" in this instance is no less than the message that True Love and its attendant values are good. In *The Princess Bride*, the relative force of the comic act to the critical act serves to heighten the tribute (which should not be interpreted to mean that a heightened comic act and subdued critical act always or even usually function in parody as a tribute). We can perhaps see the force of this tribute more clearly by comparing it to a parallel example of parody whose intent is to criticize the Ideal Woman. One short example from William Goldman's (1973) novel *The Princess Bride* (upon which the film based) should serve to demonstrate what the filmmakers could have done to underscore the critical act with its message "True Love and its attendant values are bad."

As Goldman's Westley is about to begin his quest to prove himself ideal, he declares his love for Buttercup (with a bit of one-upmanship) with the following metaphor: "If your love were a grain of sand, mine would be a universe of beaches" (p. 51). In her response, Buttercup's stupidity is made too explicit to escape notice:

> Let me get this straight. Are you saying that my love is the size of a grain of sand and yours is this other thing? Images just confuse me so — is this universal business of yours bigger than my sand? Help me, Westley, I have the feeling we're on the verge of something just terribly important. (p. 51)

In this example, and many others throughout the book, the author heightens the critical act to offer us a scathing critique of the Ideal Woman. If the book's parody does function as a tribute to the Ideal Woman, Ideal Man, or True Love, then this tribute is quite difficult to recover.

In contrast, in parodying the Ideal Woman, the film heightens the comic act and subdues the critical act to the point where it is possible for a reader (represented by the grandson) not to feel the force of the critical acts these presentations give us. By appealing to the relative strengths of the various acts comprising the total parodic act, we can "work out" the tribute to True Love in the film. The filmmakers allow Buttercup a modicum of intelligence and the ability to act. Her tumble down the mountainside is funny, and results from her half-throwing herself after Westley and half-tripping. Is she stupid or is she a klutz? This ambiguity in the re-presenting act (i.e., a potential uncertainly as to what is being re-presented as well as the possibility that more than one thing is being re-presented), coupled with the more general act of loyalty that her tumbling represents, softens the criticism. The nature of the comic act — slapstick as opposed to a more acerbic satire — also weakens the force of the critical act. The result of this interplay is that the edge is taken off the parody, thereby allowing two messages to be received: "True Love is good," and "Twue Rove" is funny.

There is a second way in which the two messages "True Love is good" and "Twue Rove is funny" might be conveyed. Often the parodic message is used both for parody and for serious discourse. In these cases, both messages are "sent" by the parodist. Again, the relative strength of the various parodic acts will contribute to which message is most clearly heard. In instances such as these, it is typical that the speaker will be able to disavow one message or the other, again depending upon the relative strengths of the acts involved. Let's look again at Buttercup's tumble down the mountainside. What is re-presented is an act of loyalty as part of the more general True Love. What woman would throw herself off a mountain for her love? The nonparodic answer, sent by the grandfather to the grandson and made visible for us by the filmmakers in that [grandfather/grandson] communicative frame, is nothing less than the Ideal Woman.

The grandfather's and the filmmaker's renditions of *The Princess Bride* are essentially the same. The grandfather's rendition, however, is told "straight" whereas the filmmaker's rendition is parodic. In the

second section we noted how this discrepancy served to underscore the parody (that is, that the frequent interruptions of the story served to flaunt the re-presentation, and the straight reading offered a counterpoint against which to read the parody); here we note that the discrepancy also serves to highlight the message "True Love is good." One reason is that the True Love is not simply recalled (re-presented), but also explicitly shown as one valid reading of the events presented to us. In "The Pragmatics of Verbal Parody," we argue that recalling earlier "straight" presentations often serves to enhance the straight message. We offer there the following parody of an indirect directive which works simultaneously as a serious indirect directive and which is enhanced by the parody: Every garbage day for the past year, John has said to Mary: "It's your turn to take out the garbage."[6] Tired of taking out the garbage, Mary says to John in playful mockery: "It's your turn to take out the garbage" (p. 744). Much as John's assertion has served as an indirect request throughout the preceding year, Mary's assertion functions as an indirect request for John to take out the garbage. The mocking tone used by Mary also indicates that Mary is parodying John's indirect requests. In this case the parody does not weaken Mary's request by turning it into a joke or a simple critique of John's habit of indirectly ordering her about. Her request, it turns out, is considerably stronger than John's and gathers its strength by the parody: the parodic tone recalls the numerous previous situations in which that directive was uttered, and therefore gives the participants further reason to take the message seriously.

In *The Princess Bride*, the serious message "True Love is good" is advanced by the grandfather. Coupled with the grandfather's straight telling, the numerous earlier renditions recalled by the parody of the Ideal Woman and the Ideal Man (from *Cinderella* to *Romeo and Juliet*) serve as one of the reasons for taking the True Love message seriously, and for believing that the filmmakers want us to take the True Love message seriously, in spite of the comic and critical messages.

We should remember that a stretch of discourse, by its sheer size, offers numerous possibilities for representing multiple objects and telling multiple stories. In the face of such multiplicities, let us also protect ourselves against Ockham's razor ("Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity") by turning the blade to our advantage. Why, we must ask, have the filmmakers so constructed their film that True Love recurs in and across every communicative context? And why, we must

continue, have they so constructed the communicative contexts so that every instance of True Love is doubly disavowable by whomever speaks it? What motivates, or necessitates, the continued rejection and disavowal? Why can't the filmmakers simply say "This is a story of True Love?" Or is True Love so horribly odious as to require constant censure?

In "The Pragmatics of Verbal Parody," we note how one can use verbal parody to pay tribute to the object re-presented. Our rationale appealed to politeness theory: "We believe [verbal parody] is used to pay tribute to its object precisely when a direct expression of tribute or affection would prove too threatening to the speaker or hearer" (p. 738–739). *The Princess Bride* is targeted to an adult audience. But the 1980s adult audience is too "smart," too "hip" to fall for True Love, or even to avow it. True Love is all right for children to avow (but not so for all children, as the grandson indicates), but not for adults. A direct presentation of True Love, of the fairy story, would most likely be rejected or ignored. Thus, with Mary Poppins, we get our medicine with a spoonful of sugar, though perhaps too much sugar. The generally negative reviews of the film suggest that we are highly literate in the language of film. Reviewers most frequently complained that the parody in *The Princess Bride* was too broad, too obvious. They were hip to the nuances of parody, and perhaps willing to read it everywhere. Is the latest James Bond film, for example, a serious James Bond film, or a parody of earlier films? Can it be anything else but a parody?

We have seen that the relative forces of the four acts comprising the parody can and do vary widely in any given situation. These variations suggest several questions for future research in parody.

What correlations are there, if any, between parodic acts (defined by the various interactions of our four essential acts) and the particular uses to which those parodies are put (i.e., for tribute, for criticism, or for some combination of these, etc.)?

What does the use of parody tell us about the social contexts which motivate it? We might further ask: 1. are there "universal" features common to all communicative/social/political contexts which motivate parody in general, or specific uses of parody (e.g., for tribute); and 2. what does a specific instance of parody have the potential to reveal about the communicative context which motivates its use. We feel that

upon fuller consideration these two questions are likely to yield the same answers.

These questions suggest that a general taxonomy of parody is in the offing — one which takes into account the ways in which people manipulate the four essential acts to comment on the world.

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Notes

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1. Deborah Rossen-Knill and Richard Henry, "The Pragmatics of Verbal Parody" (paper delivered at the Thirty-fifth Annual Convention of the Midwest Modern Language Association, Minneapolis, MN, November 1993).
2. Cicero is a noted exception. His interest in the rhetorical function of parody (*ridiculus imitatio*) is in its extra-communicative effects. He is not so much concerned with how one conveys meaning by parody, but with justifying the orator's use of wit by its effects. Among these effects are: that laughter "attracts favor to him by whom it is raised"; that laughter "overthrows the adversary, or hampers him, or makes light of him, or discourages, or refutes him"; that laughter "proves the orator himself to be a man of taste, or learning, or polish"; and that laughter "mitigates and relaxes gravity and severity" (1970: 150–51). These effects, however, are incidental to the communicative action.
3. This marks one difference between parody and irony. Irony may be "situational" and therefore open to explicit identification and commentary. Parody always requires an agent.
4. More specifically, this is a need to be protected *by the Ideal Man.* The film's most terrifying moment comes when Buttercup attempts her escape from Vizinni by leaping overboard as their ship sails through "eel-infested waters." The eels, like sharks, begin to make passes as they assess their prey. They glow in the darkened water and shriek in a most terrifying manner. The rescue comes from Fezzik, who scoops her out of the water just as an eel's teeth fill the screen. The danger is all too real and supercedes the parody of the Ideal Woman's need to be protected.
5. This is a slightly different message from that conveyed by Spielberg in *The Raiders of the Lost Ark.* When Indiana Jones encounters a massive sword-wielding opponent and dispenses him with a pistol shot, we find a critique of technology. Anyone with a gun can overcome even the most dedicated student of outmoded combat technologies.
6. Were John to issue a direct (or explicit) directive he would have said "Take out the garbage." This is what he *means* by his assertion "It's your turn to take out the garbage," though it is not what he has explicitly *said.*

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